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ABSTRACT

This paper explores factors that teachers consider to be "barriers" to educational improvement. For the study, "barriers" are those things that hinder or restrict progress. Subjects for the study were graduate students (N=151) in educational leadership programs at three Louisiana universities. The survey instrument, called the Barrier Inventory, was developed at Northeast Louisiana University with the assistance of graduate students. The items in the inventory were indicative of the barriers that the students perceived in their working environment and were developed to provide information about barriers in respondents' individual schools, as well as systemwide barriers. The teachers who responded to the instrument represented 29 of Louisiana's 66 school districts. Identified barriers included student discipline, salary and fringe benefits, and dysfunctional families. Overall, the findings identified various factors, most of which were outside the school environment, that were perceived as limiting improvement in K-12 schools. The paper claims that teachers have less control over the shaping of their students than ever before. An appendix contains the Barrier Inventory. (RJM)

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PERCEIVED BARRIERS TO IMPROVEMENT IN EDUCATION: TARGETING REFORM EFFORTS

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Perceived Barriers to Improvement in Education: Targeting Reform Efforts

Introduction

Improvement of student performance in U. S. schools has been of intense concern for parents, and consequently politicians at all levels; the business world; and, of course, educators, for well over a decade. The improvement sought generally has been translated into higher test scores which will compare favorably with those of students in other countries, but the concern does not end there. How can such desired improvement be accomplished, and as many demand, in short order? Initiatives and reforms of all types are presently in place and are continuing to be implemented in what seems to be prolific fashion. Teachers complain that they hardly get into one new initiative or change until they have to shift gears and embark on a new adventure in a new direction. Often it seems that changes at the central office, a new superintendent or board, or changes at the state level, such as a new governor or a new state superintendent, are impetus for "new" improvement initiatives.

Why haven't the intense efforts and accompanying "extra" spending produced the anticipated results? Even with expanding technology, better training for teachers, more emphasis on effective staff development, etc., improvement in students' measured performance is still disappointing to many. Could it be that many of the initiatives are misdirected and may only be topical treatments for problems which have very deep roots? It also appears that many improvement initiatives are "imposed" from the top down and teachers and building administrators may feel little or no ownership and therefore lack dedication and enthusiasm toward making the initiatives work.

Using what we will call a "rational thinking approach," it would seem that before beginning various reform efforts (which are often very costly), the reform efforts should be properly "targeted." Would it be appropriate/effective/efficient to spend great amounts of time, energy, and fiscal resources to develop and implement a new reading curriculum to improve reading scores if the students who were to have the benefits of the new curriculum were hungry, diseased, hurt, or just not interested? It seems that much of our considerable effort to improve student academic performance has fallen short of the mark or perhaps it has not been "on target." The researchers concluded that a logical approach to identifying why reform efforts have not produced the desired results would not be to ask the media, legislators, or even parents. It seemed more appropriate to ascertain what practitioners (teachers) perceived to be "barriers" to improving student academic performance so perhaps these "barriers" could be removed and future improvement efforts might be more effective. A literature review did not identify research related to teacher perceptions regarding needed reform or to perceived "barriers."

The Study

The study was conducted during the spring semester of 1997 to determine what teachers perceived to be "barriers" to educational improvement. The researchers concluded it was most appropriate to survey only those persons who were directly responsible for the performance of students in the classroom and consequently on standardized tests. For the purposes of this study the researchers defined a "barrier" as: that which hinders or restricts progress. "Perception" was defined as: personal conception which is formed by an individual as a result of experiences and impacts that individual's physical and emotional reactions. The researchers also posited the

following: If persons "perceive" the presence of "barriers" that limit their ability to perform effectively in their working environment, these "perceived barriers" will limit their performance.

Even though it is recognized that perceptions vary from individual to individual, if it could be determined that a "large number" of individuals had the same or similar perceptions, it then becomes very important to consider these perceptions, especially when they relate to barriers to performance.

Methodology

Subjects

The responding subjects in the study were graduate students in educational leadership programs at three Louisiana universities. The three participating universities and their geographic locations within Louisiana were: Northeast Louisiana University in Monroe (north central), McNeese State University in Lake Charles (southwest), and Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond (southeast). Most of the students involved were also full-time teachers attending night classes and pursuing advanced degrees or working to fulfill certification requirements. Some of those participating may have been on sabbatical leave but had previously been teachers. Most of those responding were aspiring to be school leaders.

Instrument

The survey instrument, called the Barrier Inventory (Appendix A), was developed with the assistance of graduate students in Educational Leadership classes at Northeast Louisiana University. The items were indicative of the myriad of barriers that these particular students perceived in their working environments. The instrument was developed to provide information about barriers in respondents' "individual schools" and also "system-wide" barriers.

Procedure

Initially it had been planned to administer the Barrier Inventory in four universities in Louisiana, but ultimately only three were able to participate. The instrument was administered to students in evening classes in the three Louisiana Universities. Respondents were asked to indicate their parish or school system on the instrument but personal identification was not requested.

A scale which ranged from "5 - A major barrier; very important" to "1 - We have an excellent situation in this area" was used in the survey instrument. Responses were to 39 items relating to the "Individual School" and 24 relating to "System Wide." Statistical analysis was performed using chi-square with a .05 significance level to identify significant "perceived barriers." The mean frequency of response by ranking was also calculated for each item. The material was tabulated by parish/system and also by "category." (Note: Only "Certified Professional/Non-administrator" respondents were included in the data analysis.)
The participating school systems are listed in Appendix B.

Analysis of Data

The Inventory was completed by 151 teachers representing 29 of Louisiana's 66 school districts. The tabulation of data included seven responses with no school system identified. Those items with a significant chi square and the rounded calculated value of each (a value of 40.97 and above) are as follows:

Individual School

2. Parent support/involvement for teachers and the school (44)

6. Student discipline (46)

7. Student attitudes toward education/unmotivated students (62)

13. What happens to children outside of school hours and the impact it has on their performance in school (58)

17. Student performance is limited by problems at home (50)

System-wide

49. Salary and fringe benefits (51)

54. Too many things are done for political reasons (51)

60. Life-styles of today's families (47)

61. Public ignorance about the need for, and importance of education. Education is not a priority for parents. (51)

62. Moral and ethical decay of society (70)

63. Dysfunctional families (63)

64. Legislation and regulations which limit the authority of teachers and administrators (49)

65. Too much television time for students at home (56)

The 11 items with the highest mean frequency ranking were:

1. Dysfunctional families (3.97)

2. Moral and ethical decay of society (3.95)

3. Student attitudes toward education/unmotivated students (3.93)

4. What happens to children outside of school hours and the impact it has on their performance at school (3.91)

5. Too much television time for students at home (3.82)

6. Student performance is limited by problems at home (3.79)
7. Public ignorance about the need for, and importance of education. Education is not a priority for parents. (3.70)
8. Amount of required paper work for teachers (3.69)

9.-11. Teachers' receptiveness to change (3.67)

9.-11. Parental support/involvement for teachers and the school (3.67)

9.-11. Salary and fringe benefits (3.67)

Discussion and Conclusions

Organizational theorist James G. March said that efforts to improve American education by changing its organization or administration should be met with skepticism. He likened changing education by changing educational administration to changing the course of the Mississippi by spitting into the Allegheny. Similarly, it would thus seem that many of our present and past efforts to reform education and improve the academic performance of students could be likened to applying a Band-Aid to a big toe to cure lung cancer. Our reforms will not work unless they are an appropriate cure and applied in the "right place." (Perhaps dysfunctional families should be reformed and then reform in reading programs or a longer school year might not be necessary.) It is also important that teachers and administrators feel that initiatives to improve student performance will not be thwarted by barriers, especially those which may be beyond the scope of influence of the school, and those which have been imposed by society . Improvement efforts, whatever they are called, to be successful, must be properly directed, and embraced by those who are to see that they are implemented because they have a feeling the efforts will be effective.

Continuing along the lines of our present endeavors may produce teachers who perform more ably than ever in the past and it may also produce curricula that are superior to any ever developed, but, will the "right" kids show up? It appears from the responses of the teachers that even if we are far more efficient with our present and future instructional endeavors, we still may fail to obtain the desired results. Educators have not been able to change the negative impact of those significant items identified above which are outside the purview of the school. Teachers appear to have less control over the molding and shaping of their students than ever before. Critics of effective-schools literature argue that from the beginning of such research and writings, cultural variables such as high expectations, shared values and norms, and an emphasis on intrinsic motivation have been used when referring to good schools. How much control, direction, or impact can educators expect to have over such variables?

The research identified various factors, situations, and circumstances, most of which were outside the school environment, that were perceived as limiting improvement in K-12 schools in three regions of Louisiana. The investigation revealed a number of significant "perceived barriers" at both the "Individual School" and "System-Wide" levels which must be addressed, probably by someone other than educators, before school personnel will be able to make "significant" progress in efforts to improve education in K-12 schools.

Reference

March, J. G. (1978). American public school administration: A short analysis. School Review, 86, 219.

Appendix A

BARRIER INVENTORY

If personnel "perceive" the presence of "barriers" in their working environment that limit their ability to perform effectively, these "perceived barriers" will limit performance. Even though perceptions tend to vary from individual to individual, if it can be determined that a large number of individuals have the same perceptions, it then becomes important to consider these perceptions, especially when they relate to "barriers" to performance.

This inventory was designed to allow input from personnel at various levels regarding their perceptions of "barriers." It is anticipated that the information obtained will be useful in developing strategies and plans to remove the "barriers" and action plans can be developed to implement SOLUTIONS. Your candid responses will be appreciated and specific efforts will be made to make sure all respondents' identities remain unknown.

Please identify yourself as one of the following groups:

___ Administrator
___ Certified Professional/Non-administrator
___ Support Personnel

Please identify the parish or system in which you are employed _____

Please respond using the following scale:

5 - A major barrier; very important
4 - Needs attention and improvement but not a "major barrier"
3 - Could be improved but is probably not very limiting to improvement
2 - We are doing well in this area; not a concern
1 - We have an excellent situation in this area

Where you feel it would be helpful, please use the area available with each item to elaborate. It would also be helpful if you could add other areas that were not included.

INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL

1.__ Teachers' receptiveness to change
2.__ Parental support/involvement for teachers and the school
3.__ Availability of needed supplies
4.__ Availability of needed equipment
5.__ Central office support for efforts to improve
6.__ Student discipline
7.__ Student attitudes toward education/unmotivated students
8.__ Amount of required paper work for administrators
9.__ Amount of required paper work for teachers

10.__ Number of required meetings for administrators
11.__ Number of required meetings for teachers
12.__ Physical environment (facilities, heating, lighting, etc.)
13.__ What happens to children outside of school hours and the impact it has on their performance in school
14.__ Lack of time for staff-development and planning
15.__ Racial tensions
16.__ Availability of textbooks
17.__ Student performance is limited by problems at home
18.__ Quality of the teaching staff
19.__ Quality of the administrative staff
20.__ Quality of the support staff
21.__ Lack of meeting time for teachers to work on improvement
22.__ Too many interruptions during classroom sessions
23.__ Curriculum is not properly aligned with testing at state and national levels
24.__ Too much unnecessary paper work
25.__ Test results are not used for remediation purposes
26.__ Class size (too large)
27.__ Student absenteeism
28.__ Too many students taken out of class during class sessions
29.__ Teacher attitudes
30.__ Administrator attitudes
31.__ Support personnel attitudes
32.__ Students don't take testing seriously
33.__ Poor staff development
34.__ "Special" (504 and special education) students consume too much teacher/administrator time and resources
35.__ Teachers must spend too much time on matters unrelated to improving student performance
36.__ Parents don't want the school to discipline their children
37.__ Drug and alcohol abuse by students
38.__ Faculty members not keeping current with methods, etc.
39.__ Students don't want to be at school
40.__ Other: _____

SYSTEM-WIDE

41.__ Hiring practices
42.__ Improper expenditure of existing resources
43.__ Distribution of resources to schools/programs (some get more than others)
44.__ Performance by some teachers
45.__ Performance by some administrators

46.__ Performance by the Superintendent
47.__ Performance by the School Board
48.__ Available financial resources for District usage
49.__ Salary and fringe benefits
50.__ Inclusion of "special students" in regular classes
51.__ Resources dedicated to "special students"
52.__ Teacher input into decisions affecting their job conditions, etc.
53.__ Racial tensions
54.__ Too many things are done for political reasons
55.__ Too much college preparation and not enough vocational preparation for students
56.__ Too many legal procedures that must be followed. Fear of making legal mistakes and possible court action
57.__ Parents have "too much say" in what goes on in school
58.__ Large amount of material teachers are expected to teach. Unrealistic expectations for schools
59.__ Too many uncertified teachers
60.__ Life-styles of today's families
61.__ Public ignorance about the need for, and importance of education. Education is not a priority for parents.
62.__ Moral and ethical decay of society
63.__ Dysfunctional families
64.__ Legislation and regulations which limit the authority of teachers and administrators
65.__ Too much television time for students at home
66.__ Other: _____

Appendix B

School Systems Participating and Frequency of Response from Each

Acadia Parish	2
Beauregard Parish	1
Bienville Parish	1
Calcasieu Parish	24
Caldwell Parish	2
East Baton Rouge Parish	3
Evangeline Parish	1
Franklin Parish	5
Iberia Parish	1
Jackson Parish	1
Jefferson Davis Parish	1
Lafayette Parish	1
LaSalle Parish	2
Livingston Parish	10
Morehouse Parish	7
Ouachita Parish	12
Richland Parish	7
St. Charles Parish	16
St. Landry Parish	4
St. Tammany Parish	5
Tangipahoa Parish	15
Tensas Parish	2
Vernon Parish	2
Washington Parish	1
West Baton Rouge Parish	1
West Carroll Parish	2
Monroe City Schools	9
Bogalusa City Schools	1
Not specified	7
Total	151